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“A FEW INCHES ABOVE THE MORAL ATMOSPHERE OF THESE ISLANDS”: THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE *ENGLISH REVIEW*

Simon Grimble

In any writer's mind there must be some kind of fantasy as to where he thinks he or she is writing from and the place to which he thinks his words are aimed. The place that it is from is not just the material, mundane literal place that is his office or the desk in the library or wherever, but is also an imaginary place, a place possessed, perhaps, of a view on to the world – perhaps limited, but perhaps also possessed of Olympian or Parnassian power. It also clearly matters what the form of this writing is to take: is it a novel, a poem, play, or is it, in fact, an editorial – something clearly serious, important, but also necessarily transient, tomorrow's chip wrappings. One doubts that anyone ever ate chips off a copy of the *English Review* – the splendour of the binding might tend to dissuade anyone from attempting that – but still transience is part of its world: however much the post-war Ford wanted to emphasise its primary concern with important literature and to give the impression that the political content contained in 'The Month' was basically imposed on him, Ford was clearly extremely engaged with contemporary English political questions at the time of his editing of the *English Review*.¹ And so he was – he had to be – something of a 'Thunderer' himself, somebody inclined to the vehemence and certainty that is often required of the leader article: the form that, on behalf of the reader, knocks events into shape, provides a way of reading and understanding them, but which also provides a prescription, a way of moving forward, or even a fiat or a panacea. And yet this mode is necessarily problematic, to say the least, for a writer so conclusively associated with unreliable narrators – as well as with more personal accusations of unreliability.

But we can say that the *English Review* did represent the working out of a long held desire to find a vehicle for such commanding thoughts. In 1901, Ford had written to Edward Garnett, arguing for the establishment of a 'Library of Literature' that would show how 'great writers *get their effects*:'

The idea, I say keeps booming in my head—why couldn't one make some sort of nucleus, just some little attempt at forming a small heap on which people could stand and get a point of view with their heads a few inches above the moral atmosphere of these Islands. You obviously are out of sympathy with the whole drift. But wouldn't it be worth trying?²

Ford's ambition is to found some kind of campaign of resistance to what he thinks of as 'the moral atmosphere of these Islands'. The reference to 'these Islands' is both characteristic of Ford and telling of his attitudes: this version of Britain and Ireland is imagined as crucially cut adrift, both

geographically and intellectually, from the European mainland which is also the mainstream of advanced thinking on these matters, or at least as far as Ford is concerned at this moment in time: we could therefore also say that ‘the whole drift’ that Ford refers to is threatening to wash these islands still further away, into the mid- Atlantic, from these sources of artistic and intellectual virtue. Ford is here, as elsewhere, the descendant of Matthew Arnold and his concern that ‘England is in a certain sense *far behind* the Continent’:

In conversation in the newspapers one is so struck with the fact of the utter insensibility one may say of people to the number of ideas & schemes now ventilated on the Continent - not because they have judged them or seen beyond them, but, from sheer habitual want of wide reading and thinking [...] Our practical virtues never certainly revealed more clearly their isolation.³

Arnold’s concerns are more explicitly intellectual and political than Ford’s preoccupations, as are the Continental ‘schemes’ that he mentions, but the central metaphors are noticeably related: those airy schemes now ‘ventilated’ on the Continent in Arnold’s version are the opposite of the stuffy and complacent moral atmosphere that Ford refers to, a state of English cloudiness that certainly borders on a kind of pollution, and which both he and Arnold would like to disperse, or in Ford’s case, to get above, at least by ‘a few inches’. This is, of course, a self-ironising gesture about elevated views – ‘a few inches’ is clearly not very far, but still the desire is there, the desire to be both outside a polluted and corrupting atmosphere but also to see it for what it is – with the essential help of others. But, as often with Ford, through the letter he is edging towards defeatism and pessimism, even if the effect of that is to make others sympathise with him, and therefore join him ... For the central focus of Ford’s account is the desire to form that ‘nucleus’ which is also a ‘heap’, and by that he means some kind of collaborative and collective endeavour, an avant-garde which also has some of the spirit of political reaction (embodied in his anxieties about the ‘drift’) but which is also composed of fellow feeling and mutual support, but which also needs to find a form in which to embody itself: a publication, a periodical. At the same time, Ford is confessing his own feelings of potential cultural disintegration of which he himself, and those artists like him, are at least partially an embodiment: the heap that he wants to form to gain his point of view does sound like a form of waste itself, just like the ‘heap of broken images’ in *The Waste Land*. One question is whether this will be the kind of heap on which one can stand, at least for some period of time, or one, like Winnie’s heap in Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days*, into which the protagonist will slowly sink. Another related question is the character of the heap in itself: what kind of material is it made of? This is the question considered in H. G. Wells’s *Tono-Bungay*, published in the first numbers of the *English Review*: the heaps that Wells considers are heaps of ‘quap’, the radioactive material that George Ponderevo plans to steal from an island off the coast of Africa in order to boost his uncle’s flagging business. For Wells, these heaps are toxic yet

extremely valuable: it is Wells' comment on money and high-octane capitalism, with its capacity to burn up traditions and identity, but also on what he thinks it symbolises as an essential element of the universe:

It is in matter exactly what the decay of our old culture is in society, a loss of traditions and distinctions and assured reactions. When I think of these inexplicable dissolvent centres that have come into being in our globe—these quap heaps are surely by far the largest that have yet been found in the world, the rest as yet mere specks in grains and crystals—I am haunted by a grotesque fancy of the ultimate eating away and dry-rotting and dispersal of all our world.⁴

Ford is similarly haunted by anxieties about the dispersal of the valuable aspects of culture, yet it is on the top of the best of these traditions that he wants to make his stand. These hopes and fears would be represented by the publication of the *English Review*, with its assembling of both traditions and newness, both the foreign and the local, with its sense of collaborative enterprise co-existing with Ford's feelings of suspicion and fears of betrayal, with its optimism feeding off its pessimism (and vice versa), along with its heroic and yet very self-ironising dramatisation of the editor, forever setting off on quixotic assertions of lost causes, with the help of a crew that is like a ship's crew, a 'nucleus crew' being the essential members of a ship's crew, but which is also like a band of conspirators, or a revolutionary cell. As Andrzej Gasiorek has argued elsewhere, there is a strong element of anarchism in Ford's thinking, even whilst things splitting apart are exactly what he fears.⁵ And yet Ford is also a more straightforward moralist or cultural critic in an Arnoldian sense: he is concerned that 'the moral atmosphere of these Islands' is unintellectual, impressionistic, liberal in an unthinking sense (emphasising the validity of the individual response in opposition to more 'objective' standards: Ford's version of Arnold's 'doing as one likes'), ensnared in sexual hypocrisy which prevents clear speaking on such issues, dated in its forms of expression, unable to render its own time in the language of its own time, but also subject to a philistine press, the threatening representative of the contemporary demos.

In all of these things Ford, and the *English Review*, are both outsiders and insiders, insurgents and embattled defenders. Opposed to that lack of confidence which means that he can only hope to get 'a few inches' above the moral atmosphere is the hope that one could be on the inside of power, and to be seen and acknowledged as one 'in the know', connected to the great and the good. On 2nd November 1908, *The Times* carried an advertisement for the forthcoming *English Review*, which claimed, amongst other things, that 'editorial comment [was] to be provided by the communications of statesmen and diplomatists.'⁶ It remains obscure how exactly this editorial comment was to be provided: would the 'statesmen and diplomatists' write it themselves? Or would they somehow provide it through their 'communications' to the editor and his writers? But clearly Ford did want to impress on potential readers this sense that his periodical was connected to such people, and therefore

to high politics, in important ways. At the same time, there is something slightly garbled about this statement: the last date of usage for the noun ‘diplomatist’ employed by the *OED* is 1860, although the word was still being used in the early twentieth century. But Ford’s use of it implies that there was something dated, wilfully slightly archaic, in his conception of the high politics to which he wishes to be connected. This in turn raises the question of how reliable the ‘editorial comment’ is to be: is this editor really ‘in the know’? Or is he some kind of fraud? Ford clearly did want some of that gentleman’s club spirit that emerges in Arnold’s account of his conversation in the Athenaeum Club with Disraeli about his coining of what the former Prime Minister calls his ‘current phrases’ (‘such as Philistinism, sweetness and light, and all that’⁷), and in his friendship with C.F.G. Masterman, a minister in the Liberal government at the time of the publication of Ford’s *English Review*, Ford did indeed possess *some* of those connections. But what kind of authority did he have for such pronouncements as the following, issued during the Dreadnought crisis of 1909, when British public opinion, alarmed by the growing German navy, demanded that Britain should build eight of the new Dreadnought battleships:

But we have it on good authority that at least one Continental Power would welcome an informal intimation from the Foreign Office that Great Britain, as being the Power most open to damage at sea, would consider an increase of the fleet of any other nation as an unfriendly action directed against herself, and we have no doubt whatever that once this action were taken, several other Powers would join ourselves.⁸

Here Ford is connected to the corridors of power both at home *and* abroad (even if the insights he is privy to can only be whispered to him): he is truly Arnoldian in that sense, with international culture operating closely in tandem with international relations, and in this scheme the *English Review* situates itself in the mid-Channel in a positive sense, looking over to the continent but also back to England. It may also be important to remember where Ford had been living in the early years of the twentieth century: at Winchelsea in East Sussex, where he was both close to the respective homes of Henry James and Joseph Conrad, but also looking over the Channel towards the Continent, to where, at the outbreak of the First World War, for James, ‘just on the other side of that finest of horizon-lines history was raging at a pitch new under the sun.’⁹ Even before the war, for both Ford and James there was a sense that history was – if only partially – elsewhere, over that horizon, because England suffered from ‘insularity’, to use James’s word, but both Ford and James position themselves as look-outs, watch-men, who are sensitive to what is not just ‘within the rim’, but to what is beyond it too. There were further pragmatic reasons for their choice of location: within reasonable commuting distance to London, the place where reputations were made and lost and which supported a whole network of cultural relationships (dining clubs, literary agents etc), and yet far enough away to claim a reasonable distance from both London’s fashionable preoccupations, and, also, far enough away to

make property, and therefore the life of the English gentleman of letters, affordable. Finally, there they were also close enough to access the ferries that would take each across the Channel and towards the ‘freedom’ of Ostend, Paris, Italy and so on. But still it is unclear whether those kinds of connections were sufficient to support Ford’s claimed-for position as international man of affairs, and to see the *English Review* as the organ for the propagation of those insights.

Instead, the much more common emphasis in Ford’s editorial writing for the *English Review* was on the disconnection of the English man of letters from such kinds of political power or influence, because the cultural and political landscape, in the absence of a self-consciously public culture, tended to fragment into individualism (and gentlemanliness), unlike the world elsewhere that is France and the. As Ford wrote in the opening number of the *English Review*:

The English man of letters of any distinction lives apart, dotted over the face of the country, each one isolated, as it were, upon a little hill. He has no Academy like that of the Immortal Forty; he belongs to no movement and in consequence the Art of Letters in England has practically no social weight and practically no contact with the life of the people. It is with the attempt to form some such meeting-place that THE ENGLISH REVIEW has set out upon its career—that the attempt is foredoomed to failure we know very well, for to attempt to form a combination of strong individualists is obviously the attempt of a madman.¹⁰

So, instead all of the men of letters being united on Olympus or Parnassus or even in the halls of the Académie Française, ‘each one [is] isolated, upon a little hill’ (one of the South Downs each, say). The problem, in one way, is the question of distinction: clearly, when the English man of letters achieves ‘distinction’, in the sense of intellectual and literary achievement, he will then demonstrate that distinction by removing himself from the city that enabled him to achieve that distinction in order to take up the position, land and housing of a gentleman, in the country, just as Ford, James and Conrad, had done. Literary distinction (and the financial returns which it can bring about) then enables social distinction, but this has a spatial correlation, life ‘in the country’, which means that the men of letters tend to no longer inhabit a ‘meeting-place’ – the ‘republic of letters’ has to operate over these distances, rather than through inhabiting a position on the left bank of the Seine, which, in Ford’s imagination at least, represents that meeting-place, as well as a kind of standing power in relation to both the state and political and cultural life in general: ‘contre le pouvoir’ in various senses but also a power in its own right. The ‘English’ position of distinction ‘upon a little hill’ does also have its advantages: it means that the English man of letters has the certain distance already mentioned above – the position of partial withdrawal that he has taken up means that he may be more able to practice the ‘disinterestedness’ that Arnold had wanted to characterise the function of criticism, a freedom from the pressures of political party or religion or commerce, in order ‘to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.’¹¹ Certainly, Ford, Conrad and James

wanted to get away from those things. But it also tends to lead, in Ford's mind, to a flourishing of individuals who can then not be united in a common practice and a common space, 'for to attempt to form a combination of strong individualists is obviously the attempt of a madman.' In this case, Ford's attempt to use the *English Review* as that surrogate meeting-place means that he, the editor, is that 'madman', attempting to unify these various isolated, strong-willed, possibly eccentric, possibly insane figures (like the madman, who is necessarily one of the 'strong individualists' himself). But because of the social structure, these thoughts can only be ever untimely meditations, ones which portray the editor as an alienated outsider, who desperately tries to move the men of letters from their little hills onto his temporary 'heap', but agonises about the Art of Letters and its lack of 'social weight.' This, he worries, is particularly the case with James and Conrad, because their extreme eminence (more of an Alp than a little hill), means that they threaten to disappear out of sight:

Mr. Conrad and Mr. James stand so far above any other imaginative writers of to-day that their significance and their importance are apt to be a little lost. They stand, moreover, so far apart from another that they have, as far as any literary movement is concerned, an entire want of unity or cohesion.¹²

As discussed above, Arnold's idea of disinterestedness implies having some kind of distance from the world and its preoccupations - in order to better understand them. But James and Conrad have such distance that they seem disconnected from the world - unable to either unite with it or with each other to form the coherent avant-garde, if we take the progressive view, or even to collectively defend the little hill on which they can take their last stand.

But one can also see, in Ford's account, why one would want to be at such a distance. The pages of 'The Month' repeatedly show an antagonistic relationship between this editor and the political culture of the present, even if Ford did still aspire to be a person of importance in that culture. 'The Critical Attitude' of January 1910 begins with the question, ahead of the January 1910 election that would act as a kind of referendum on Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' of 1909 and the constitutional standoff that had produced: 'Could anything be more depressing than the present state of public affairs?'¹³ He goes on to profess his disaffection with both of the predominant political parties, citing principally their materialism and lack of principle, which in turn is inciting the nation as a whole into a 'class war': 'On the one side there is little or no talk of liberty or of any of the higher things, on the other there is no talk at all of the old traditions or of the finer things. And from both side come perpetual cries of "Grab".'¹⁴ In this process of cultural decline the parties are singularly aided by the work of the 'periodical Press', in particular 'the lower Conservative Press', which 'is all-devouring, is all present:'

It seems to taint the food we eat; it seems to render miasmatic the air we breathe. It is more vulgar than the vulgarest of demagogues; it is more mendacious than the most irresponsible of speakers at a street corner. Yet the lower press has taken in hand, has controlled, for the first time, the entire fortunes of the Conservative party.¹⁵

This vision of the corrupting and inescapable power of the new popular press - clogging hearts, eyes and lungs, and dragging down the level of public debate to such dismal levels - is obviously part of wider anxieties about the changing position of the press, especially since the outbreaks of 'jingoism' that marked the Boer War.¹⁶ However, Ford also shows some derision for 'the Liberal Press' in its tendency to ignore or to underplay those aspects of contemporary life which it finds unsightly but to which it does not have a straight answer: in particular, its underreporting of 'deportations' of political agitators in India ('DEPORTATIONS! The comfortable Liberal imagines two or three happy agitators seated beneath the palm-trees, eating rare fruits in a climate cool and more salubrious than that of their own provinces').¹⁷ He also deplores its unwillingness to consider fairly and honestly the question of votes for women, which Ford strongly supported: he directs particular attention to those subjected to force-feeding whilst on hunger-strike: 'In the barbarous and never sufficiently to be reprehended Middle Ages this punishment was known as the *peine forte et dure*. Liberal newspapers have not, so far as we have been able to discover, claimed yet for Mr. Gladstone the honour of this splendid revival.'¹⁸

The question here is, and for Ford in general in the *English Review*, what is the force of his irony and sarcasm? The review had been set up as a neo-Arnoldian project to embody disinterestedness and the critical attitude and to provide for the publication of various kinds of august imaginative literature. However, it had also been founded in a spirit of pessimism: Ford may have been against the inheritance of Romanticism in various ways, but the founding of the review was also in one sense a romantic gesture; one doomed to failure. The two 'communications' that Ford says he has received in advance of the publication of the first number are scarcely encouraging blessings: the one given by George Bernard Shaw is 'taken at once as a benediction and as a prophecy of disaster.'¹⁹ Ford extemporises on a metaphor of the *English Review* as a boat, being rowed out to sea for the first time, but there seems to be an implied fear that it will soon be holed below the waterline. As this is the case, then it would seem difficult for Ford to generate the kind of confidence which would repel his tendency to display a kind of strangely undirected sarcasm. Many of Ford's contributions to 'The Month' – and especially those which are directed largely to political considerations and are not primarily literary in focus – are very discontinuous in nature: the tone is notably uneven, even if his lashings out seem to be pretty fairly spread around. This unevenness is present right from the beginning: in the first version of 'The Month' he imagines the topics will include 'the production of a well-flavoured book, the commencement of a historic series, the production of a play not too shallow, the chronicling of a symphony, the opening of a gallery containing fine etchings.'²⁰ A 'well-flavoured

book’? ‘Fine etchings’? This sounds like the critic as belles-lettristic gourmand (which actually may not be so far out as a characterisation of Ford) – but it also raises the possibility that Ford doesn’t believe in any of it, that there is something incredible, even despicable about the fruits of his own labour.

We can develop this point further by considering the range of Ford’s targets in the *English Review*. In no particular order they include but are not limited to: a critique of England as ‘the country of Accepted Ideas’²¹, a complacent, unintellectual, uncritical land where one might imagine nothing ever really changes, and one which is basically hostile to, or at least unmoved by, the higher, more exacting standards embodied in the work of the true artist. It is also implied that England should pay attention to these things for its sake as much as for the artist’s, for ‘Flaubert said that had the French really read his “Education Sentimentale” France would have avoided the horrors of the *Débâcle*. Mr. James might say as much for his own country and for the country he has so much benefitted by making it his own.’²² It’s clear that Ford doesn’t just want an equivalent to the Académie Française; only a really detailed understanding of *Un Education Sentimentale* will do the job of preventing national crises. So, the implication is that if the kinds of standards and awareness that Flaubert and James embody were to be recognised and even incorporated into the practise of the life of the nation (in some way, however unclear that might be), then various potential national disasters could be warded off. On the other hand, the pages of ‘The Month’ describe England as a country that is, in fact, going through sudden, radical changes, a country that is seething with tensions of various kinds. However, Ford seems to assume that these tensions are not exactly the product of various competing ideas, about class, progress, the role of the state and income distribution: they seem instead to be the product of various instincts which could not be characterised as having reached the level of ‘idea’. For example, to return to the example of ‘the lower Conservative Press’, Ford imagines it as ‘all-devouring’, as if were some kind of monster, but also as an entity that pollutes anything and everything, tainting the food we eat, making the air we breathe ‘miasmatic’. In these senses it seems to relate to fears about degeneration that had proliferated in the general biologising of social theory since the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859. The press, by generally pandering to humanity’s ‘lower instincts’, becomes a monster which pollutes as well as devours, stopping anything from being seen clearly, but also furthering the desire of the editor to find a way to get ‘a few inches above the atmosphere of these Islands.’ But in this desire Ford is located in a tradition of thinking about ‘the condition of England’ that even predates the dissemination of Darwin, but which is bound up in other, more literal forms of pollution. In ‘The Fogs of London’ in his *My Past and Thoughts*, the Russian political organiser and theorist, Alexander Herzen, had written about what it was like to live in London, as an exile, in the middle of the nineteenth century:

There is no town in the world which is more adapted for training one away from people and training one into solitude than London. The manner of life, the distances, the climate, the very

multitude of the population in which personality vanishes, all this together with the absence of Continental diversions conduces to the same effect. One who knows how to live alone has nothing to fear from the tedium of London. The life here, like the air here, is bad for the weak, for the frail, for one who seeks a prop outside himself, for one who seeks welcome, sympathy, attention; the moral lungs must be as strong as the physical lungs, whose task it is to separate oxygen from the smoky fog. The masses are saved by battling for their daily bread, the commercial classes by their absorption in heaping up wealth, and all by the bustle of business; but nervous and romantic temperaments - fond of living among people, fond of intellectual sloth and of idly luxuriating in emotion - are bored to death and fall into despair.²³

There can be no doubt that Ford would class himself, with his own family history of immigration as well as their interest in and sympathy for 'Continental diversions', as one of those 'nervous and romantic temperaments' who had suffered his own fall into despair during his breakdown in 1904. There is also no doubt that he wanted to transcend or cut through those 'fogs' before they finished off this particular member of the weak and the frail. Or perhaps not quite so weak and frail, as Ford had, along with Herzen, to some extent trained himself into withstanding this. As Herzen goes on to say, out of this experience of solitude in London, 'I learnt a great deal.' But for Ford, out of all this cloudiness and lack of clarity, which also seems to symbolise, to some extent, stupidity, and the possibility of being stupefied oneself, as well as an unfatal solipsism as you wander through the fogs unable to see or recognise anyone else, through this shines both the desire for 'welcome, sympathy, attention' and the necessity for violent gestures, even if they are buried amongst the editorial pages of 'The Month':

We may never have a Parthenon: perhaps one day we may nerve ourselves, say, to the extent of being proud of the National Gallery or of cleaning out from that Augean stable, the Tate, its huge proportion of dreary and inane canvases.²⁴

Those 'dreary and inane canvases': both ugly in a depressing way that is not even really worth describing (and which is inclined to make you 'awearied' and wish that you were dead, according to Tennyson's 'Mariana') and stupid, 'inane', which in a way is worse than stupid, because it is trying to be something more than it is. No wonder Ford thinks we should nerve ourselves to complete this Herculean task, but he doesn't seem hopeful, even if he really wants to do it. But his fear is in a sense justified, that the fogs of pollution and inanity, are in some way contagious, in that the editor himself, despite his desperate desire to get 'a few inches above the atmosphere of these Islands', may himself be guilty of what he accuses others of, a certain 'cloudiness of spirit'. In his review of C.F.G. Masterman's *The Condition of England*, he laments Masterman's own inability to produce a sense of clarity about what exactly the condition of England is: 'And so Mr. Masterman wavers from

despondency to hope, wavers from hope to caution and ends by saying he cannot tell where we stand.’²⁵

It is this uncertainty about where he himself stands that produces the characteristic uncertainty, or perhaps undecidability, of Ford’s tone.²⁶ The irony that pervades much of his fiction and, often, his autobiographical writing, can turn into sarcasm when Ford comes to take up the position of leader-writer or editorialist in the *English Review*, where he therefore comes to take on the mantle of the man of letters, despite the fact that he had commemorated ‘The Passing of the Great Figure’ in an early number of his own periodical. By this he had meant, that the high Victorian days of Gladstone, Tennyson, Ruskin, Arnold et al had ended, to be replaced by a present day where no similar figures had such a commanding relationship to their audience, due to a variety of social and intellectual changes, which meant that the high liberalism which Ford associated with high Victorianism was now challenged by a partially democratised, enlarged but damaged public sphere: we can see an early version of F.R. Leavis’s ‘Mass Civilisation versus Minority Culture.’ But, still, to be the editor of a journal with such august hopes as the *English Review* meant that Ford was still in some sense continuing this role of ‘the great figure’ himself, even if it felt somewhat diminished. The sarcasm emerges as Ford struggles to deal with the uncertainties built into the situation, and it seems to take on two primary forms. Firstly, there is a very uneven kind, where the reader could be unsure as to what exactly the force of the sarcasm is. For example, as Ford continues his examination of the question of the force-feeding of suffragettes on hunger-strike in jail, he discusses the position of the Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone, the son of W.E. Gladstone – four-times Liberal Prime Minister and ‘great figure’ himself - who was in a position of overall responsibility for the treatment of those women. Ford remarks on the irony of the situation, given that W.E. Gladstone had frequently protested against the harsh treatment of political minorities in other European countries in the 1870s and 1880s. ‘It has been reserved for Mr. Gladstone – oh, sacred name, whose echoes bear in their skirts gracious and fluttering whispers of the word “Liberty!” – it has been reserved for Mr. Gladstone to cause the maltreatment of women in our own gaols.’²⁷ It is hard to know exactly what to make of those echoes and their skirts, except that perhaps Ford is not happy about any of these things: he is not happy about the force-feeding of the women, he is not happy about pious philanthropic liberalism of the (first) Gladstonian kind, but which itself seems to be associated with misguidedly altruistic upper-class females, but he is also not happy with Herbert Gladstone for breaking the Gladstonian covenant. It is even harder to see what is entirely meant by this sarcasm when one reads the piece in its original context: it is buried in the course of an extremely long paragraph, which is dense and allusive, like a modernist novel, but which does not say ‘this is a modernist novel: therefore it is going to be dense and allusive, and you, the reader, had better be prepared for that.’ The uncertainty of the tone seems to be related to the fact that Ford is not sure who is talking to, and quite how many of them are going to be listening: one suspects that some of even the dedicated readers of the *English Review* sometimes skipped over much of the contents of ‘The Month’ – or read a few paragraphs, and then abandoned it.

Which, in a sense, was the problem: Ford's fear of not being listened to, and of not having real power, makes him more likely to lash out in the first place.

But there is another kind of sarcasm in the *English Review*: one where we know exactly what is going on. The word 'sarcasm' comes from the Greek, *σαρκάζειν*, 'to tear flesh', and so it aims to do violence to that which it criticises. We find this in the publication of 'On the Objection to the Critical Attitude' in February 1910, when Ford already knew that the *English Review*, at least under his editorship, had already failed. He was then prepared to say what he – *really* – thought, about the reasons for its failure:

IN these islands critics have been extraordinarily rare. When they have arisen they have been listened to with dislike and dread, or with a show of respect. Then they have been patted out of the way. If a slug should enter a bee-hive these industrious insects will, if they can accomplish it, slay him with their stings, but failing this, and in any case, they set to work and cover him with wax. They pack the wax down, they smooth it over: they extinguish, in fact, that poor slug until he reposes beneath a fair monument, a respectable protuberance from which escape neither groans nor foul odours. Now our islands are the bee-hives, and what is the critic in England, when direfully he appears, but just a slug? He lives if he has a chance, suspected, dreaded, applauded. Then he disappears. He is covered with the wax of oblivion. So it has been with, let us say, Hobbes, Matthew Arnold, and Mr. Ruskin, who, being dead, are nearly as much forgotten as, let us say, the inventor of the safety bicycle.²⁸

And so Ford attempts to bite back, through the wax: but what does he taste? Not so much the blood of the complacent, unintellectual, emollient great British public (the reader should note that we are back to 'these islands' again), but, one would guess, just more wax: if he did get through, however, then one would have to remember that the bees can provide not just wax but also stings. He also does not want to hurt his readers, who are, of course, the heroic few who have stuck it out to the end, but he does want to satisfy them, just as he wants to satisfy himself. And to be able to give out the superiority of judgment and criticism is very satisfying. It is not a satisfaction that lasts, or that changes anything, but, at the moment that it is pronounced, it is very satisfying. And, of course, what he says is in one way true, as well as being funny in a bitter way: the condition of being a critic, of culture and society, does tend to mean that you might well be forgotten and sent to oblivion (rather than, say, the artist, who produces work that could be said to transcend the historical moment of its production, or so T.S. Eliot would hope), just because to be a critic is to criticise something in particular, which you then stand in relation to, and if the entity that you criticise disappears or loses centrality, then your point (and your criticism) tends to get lost: just as many readers would now struggle to understand the point of *Culture and Anarchy* without some understanding of the historical context, whilst they would be very much able to 'enjoy' or 'appreciate' *Great Expectations* or

Middlemarch. This situation is particularly signified by the form in which these critical reflections are generally embodied: in periodical or in other kinds of occasional publication, which, until the recent advent of digital and online resources, meant that your words could very much suffer the same fate as the inventor of the safety bicycle; here today and gone tomorrow. One could try to recover this situation, as Ruskin's editors, E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, did in their contemporaneous *Library Edition* of Ruskin's complete works (1903-12; all 39 volumes). But then they worried that what they were producing was not so much a monument as a mausoleum, and it is true to say that Ruskin would come to be seen as increasingly dated after the publication of that edition: just another part of the Victorian past that would need to be sloughed off by the moderns. So, there is not even a view from the monument or mausoleum: that particular 'heap' is only raised when the critic is dead, and so he will never get to stand on it, in order to get those crucial 'few inches above the moral atmosphere of these Islands.' But others might, if they spare the time.

But, in all this, we should also see Ford as a representative figure and not purely as an exceptional one. His uncertainty, his contradictory positions, portray both his anxiety and our anxiety at facing a world which we do not wholly understand, and whose depravity, in whatever form it emerges, tempts us into the superiority of condemnation. And so we should also to some extent resist seeing his work, as it were, teleologically: somehow always aimed at the finished achievement of *The Good Soldier* or *Parade's End*, or instead as something that can be stripped down to providing some of the originating principles behind 'modernist literary doctrine'. If instead, we think of Ford in a more actively historical sense, we can see him as a particularly sensitive and intelligent witness to the 'atmosphere' of his times even as he wants to cut through or disperse the 'miasma', and not be buried, face-down, in the 'sea-ooze'.

¹ 'To imagine that a magazine devoted to imaginative literature and technical criticism alone would find more than a hundred readers in the United Kingdom was a delusion that I in no way had. It must therefore of necessity be a hybrid, giving at least half its space to current affairs. Those I did not consider myself fit to deal with. I knew either nothing about them or I knew so much I could not form any opinions.' From *Return to Yesterday*, 1931, in *The Bodley Head Ford Madox Ford*, vol. I, London: Bodley Head, 1962, p. 310

² *Letters of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Richard M. Ludwig, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965, p. 15.

³ Matthew Arnold, letter to Jane Martha Arnold, March 28, 1848, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, London: University Press of Virginia, 1996, 6 vols, vol. I, p. 98.

⁴ H.G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, in *ER*, 1: 4 (March 1909), p. 742.

⁵ Andrzej Gasiorek, 'Ford Among the Aliens', in *Ford Madox Ford and Englishness*, ed. Dennis Brown and Jenny Plastow, Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2006, pp. 63-82.

⁶ Advertisement for *ER*, in *The Times*, 2 November 1908, p. 9.

⁷ Matthew Arnold, letter to Francis Bunsen Trevenen Whately Arnold, February 21, 1881, in *Letters*, vol. V, p. 135.

⁸ 'The Critical Attitude', *ER*, 2:7 (June 1909), p. 585

⁹ Henry James, 'Within the Rim', in *Within the Rim and Other Essays* (London: Collins, 1918), pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ 'The Function of the Arts in the Republic. IV. The Plastic Arts', *ER*, 1:4 (March 1909), p. 797.

¹¹ Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', in *Essays in Criticism; First Series* (London: Macmillan, 1898; first publ. 1865), p. 37.

¹² 'English Literature of To-day', *ER*, 3:12 (November 1909), p. 660.

¹³ 'The Critical Attitude', *ER*, 4:14 (January 1910), p. 329.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 329.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 330.

¹⁶ C.f. G.M. Trevelyan, 'The White Peril', *Nineteenth Century And After*, 50: 298 (December 1901), pp. 1043-55.

¹⁷ 'The Critical Attitude', *ER*, 4:14 (January 1910), p. 332.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 333.

¹⁹ 'The Function of the Arts in the Republic', *ER*, 1:1 (December 1908), p. 157.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 158.

²¹ Ibid, p. 160.

²² Ibid, p. 160.

²³ Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, trans. Constance Garnett, abridged Dwight Macdonald, London: University of California Press, 1973: first publ. 1868, p. 445.

²⁴ 'The Function of the Arts in the Republic. IV. The Plastic Arts.', p. 798.

²⁵ Review of *The Condition of England*, August 1909.

²⁶ For more on these questions see the chapter on Ford in the present author's *Landscape, Writing and 'the Condition of England', 1878-1917- Ruskin to Modernism* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

²⁷ 'The Critical Attitude', *ER*, 4:14 (January 1910), p. 333.

²⁸ 'On the Objection to the Critical Attitude', *ER*, February 1910, p. 532.